

RollPlay

GM

NOTEBOOK

ISSUE 10

Text: Adam Koebel

Art Direction/Layout: Daniel at LiveSpace

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VAL'KHMAW**

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B) 1ST FLOOR

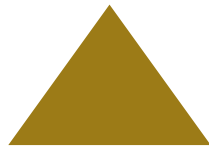
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Welcome, Patrons!

In the month of May, 2017, we've seen a few big endings - the end of the first arc of Nebula Jazz and the finale of Season 2 of Court of Swords. Moves are being made to guide Blades to a conclusion (we'll see if we can't lure John over to write a bit about his feelings and thoughts on the campaign in the next month or so) and change is in the air! I've grown really fond of treating RPGs like they're tv shows over the last little while, whether by simply choosing to describe things in terms of shot and soundtrack or by structuring my games into seasons the way we have been of late. I think it's something that can help combat game fatigue - being able to say "this part of the campaign is over, but we love the world too much to let it go, let's see what's happening elsewhere". In this issue, I hope to give you a look at some of the thoughts I have about Court of Swords and some tools I'm using to manage season 3, as well as some very old early-campaign map sketches I made before the first arc of the show.

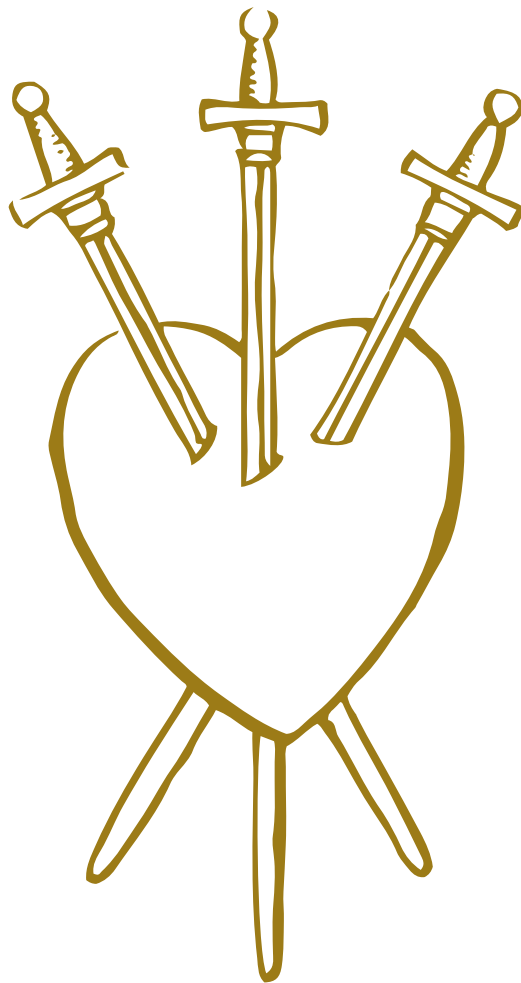
As always, if you have feedback or just an idea for what you'd like to see covered in a future Notebook, let me know - start a thread over at <http://community.itmejp.com/> and let me know what you're aching to learn.

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 10 of the GM's Notebook.

Adam Koebel / RollPlay GM

LOVE LETTERS

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Love Letters are a super cool trick that I stole from Apocalypse World, stuck in Dungeon World and continue to use in other games to manage stuff like time skips. They can be incredibly useful when you want to jump ahead in time and let the players tell you what's been going on, but you also want to constrain their efforts and make them make hard decisions. They have a few parts, but fundamentally look and work like a Dungeon World or Apocalypse World move.

First, you write the letter itself. I tend to write these in a very casual, almost snippy tone. It's the same way I wrote the class introductions in Dungeon World and it's kind of my "well well, fancy pants, let's see if you're as cool as you think you are" tone. It's very much in my voice, but you'll find writing them in your own GM voice will work well. It's just a way to say "here's where we were, here's where we're at" and then ask for a roll.

The roll itself is standard fare, as far as these things go. I usually ask for a $2d6+1$ roll, because of math (you're likely to end up in the 7-9 where the hard choices lie) but you can modify this to make it more or less

likely your PCs are gonna get the bad option. Don't push it past + or - 3 though, that's already more or less assured a good or bad result.

When you write the results, the easiest way is to say "if you roll a 10 or better, you get two out of three things, if you get a 7-9 you choose one thing, and if you miss, you don't get any of the things and here's a special bad news result for you" then you write a list of three choices - two being positive and one being "a bad thing doesn't happen". This will, more often than not, give you a result under which the players have to make a hard choice for their character. They're going to feel stuck between their own greed for cool stuff and their fear of bad things. You can use the bad things option to advance or create a Front as well, if you're using those (or countdown clocks, etc.)

Here's the ones I used to open Season 3 for Berg, Ramus and Enoch. I think I'll try and write one for Anne's new character, too - they're so good to set the stage.

Dearest Berg,

Many years have passed since we saw you last. you've been working under the shadow of the tower and in the company of your new mentor, the immortal servant of destruction, Hazan al-Baraj. All the while, the influence of darkness within you has been growing. Let's see how you're doing. Roll 2d6+1.

On a 7-9 choose 1, on a 10+ choose 2

- you've been diligent in your training efforts, raise a stat by one
- you've been able to keep the darkness at bay
- you've discovered some new magic item in your travels, we'll roll to find out what it is if

you get a 6 or less, the toll will be dire.

Roll the bones, tough guy.

Enoch, my friend, welcome to the party.
I can't promise you're going to have a good ride, but
then things have been pretty nasty for you since you
left your noble house, huh? Let's see what you've got
left over.

Roll 2d6+1

On a 7-9 choose 1, on a 10+ choose two

- some cachet remains attributed to your name,
someone important owes you one favor they can't say
no to

- the mara aren't chewing on the bones of your
family, looking for marrow
- your loyal retainer is especially loyal and talented,
it'll take more than earthly threats to shake them

On a miss, all that's left of your once-great family is
ash and bitter ruin. tough luck, but that's how it
goes.

MY BELOVED RAMUS,

LOOKS LIKE HEAVEN WILL HAVE TO WAIT. HAZZAN BROUGHT YOU BACK
BEFORE YOU COULD ACHIEVE YOUR JUST REWARDS. SHAME HOW THAT
WORKS, BUT NOW YOU'VE GOT A NEW GOD. A GOD OF DESTRUCTION. LET'S
SEE HOW MUCH THE TOWER LOVES YOU.

Roll 2D6+1

ON A 7-9 CHOOSE 1, ON A 10+ CHOOSE 2

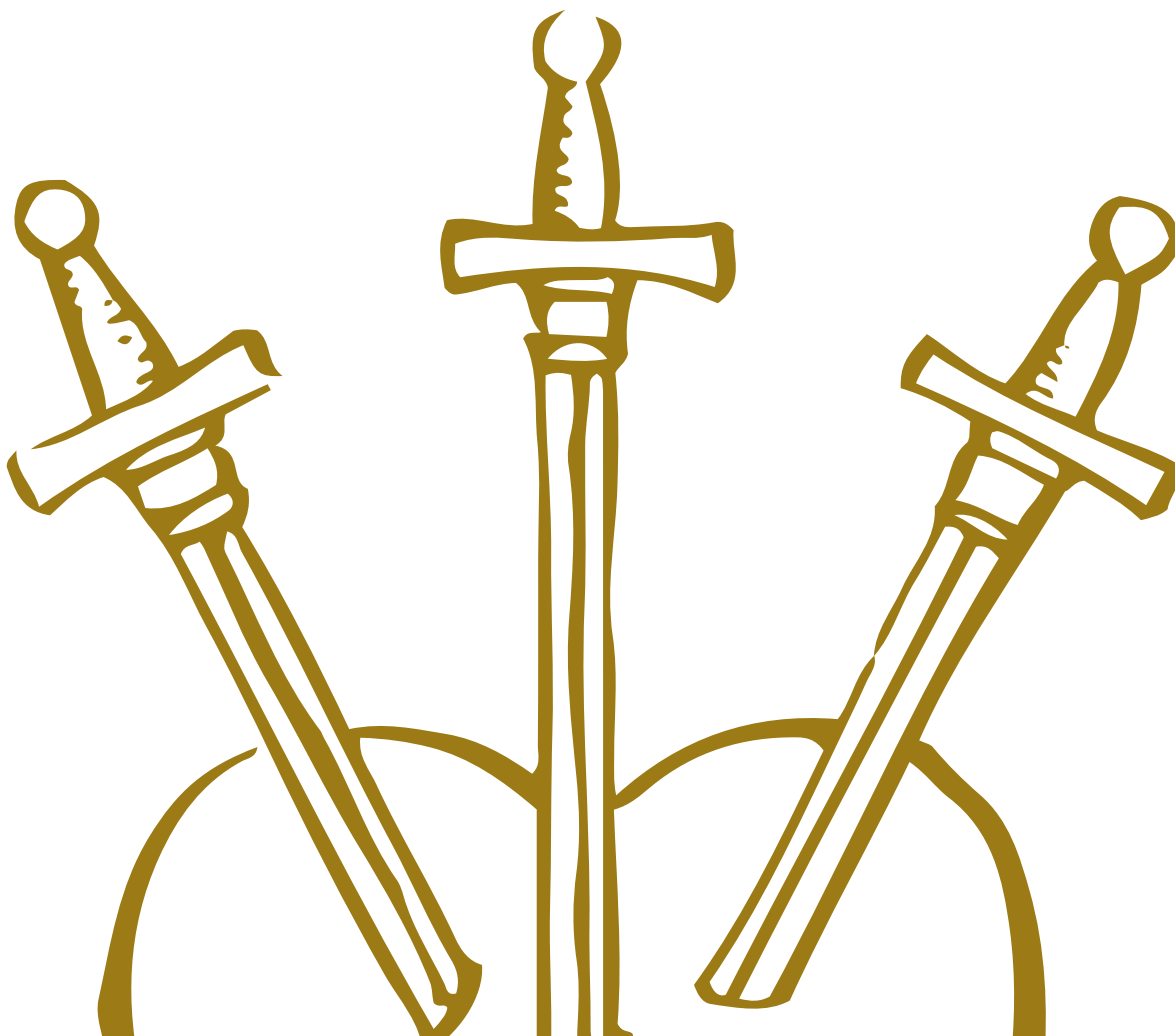
- THE TOWER HAS BLESSED YOU WITH TWO RANDOM STAT BOOSTS. ADD +1
TO TWO RANDOM STATS - NOBODY CAN TELL THAT YOUR SOUL IS
FUNDAMENTALLY FUCKED UP AND DISSOLVING IN A REAL BAD WAY
- YOUR NEW MAGIC IS MORE POTENT THAN BEFORE. THE TOWER BLOCKS
OUT THE SUN, ALL YOUR SPELL DCs ARE INCREASED BY ONE

IF YOU GET A 6 OR LESS, IT'S ALL SHADOW AND NO TOWER, BUDDY.

So what we end up with are some nice neat little packages for each player to get their character right into the world. Feel free to create and use these in your own campaign whenever there's a time skip, a few missed weeks of play or just a change in scenario, situation or

location. They're super fun ways to set the scene as long as you make sure that the bonuses all feel more or less even for whatever game you're playing and that the failures and "bad" choices always lead somewhere fun!

III



SEASON 3

FRONTS

Fronds are a tool I've talked about before - something I use as a GM to keep track of the immediate and not-so immediate threats in the world. You might recognize them as countdown clocks, or call them something else in the game you're playing, but they're really just a structured note-taking tool for managing what's going on in the world. I've modelled mine after the way they're presented in Dungeon World - divided into two types; Campaign and Adventure Fronts. The former are high-level arcs that are happening offscreen and backstage. The latter are here, now, in the moment. They're fluid, in the way that all GM notes are, and items will move back and forth from one to the other. Fronts can boil up and get bigger, or they can fade away

into the background, all progressing at their own pace. Here's where things are, Front-wise, as of Episode 35 of Court of Swords.

Unless the PCs directly or indirectly get involved, this is how these things will go...



CAMPAIGN FRONTS

The War Against the Necromancer King

- + The Necromancer King returns to the Riverlands, full of the dark power of the Mara
- + The Necromancer King destroys a couple of villages, his army grown
- + The Court of Swords sends Magistrates to stop him
- + The Magistrates are killed, unsuccessful in their quest
- + The Necromancer King gains followers enough to rightly call themselves an army
- + The Court of Swords goes to war with the Necromancer King
- + Initial skirmishes do not go well, a protracted conflict begins
- + The other Courts deny the Court of Swords aid, hoping for their own political gains
- + The Court of Swords begins to lose the war as the Army of the Dead only grows
- + The Capital is seized by the Necromancer King
- + The Court of Swords falls
- + A new Kingdom of Hell on Earth is raised, the black flag of the Mara flown over the Palaces of the Court
- + The other Courts rally for war

An Impending Invasion by Extradimensional Psionically Empowered Elves

- + The First Colonizing Force is awakened
- + The Second Colonizing Force is awakened
- + The Xulin Valley is colonized
- + ???
- + Elves arrive en masse
- + War is inevitable

Queen Nakana'ino

- + The Dark God of the Serpent People is Awakened
- + Yuan'ti Civil War
- + Queen Nakana'ino declared high ruler of the Yuan'ti Empire, Reborn
- + Diplomatic attempts with the Court of Coins do not go well
- + An important member of the Family Coins is poisoned
- + Outright hostility and war in the southern Jungles
- + Magistrates are sent to deal with (ie assassinate Nakana'ino)
- + Counter-assassins kill the Court of Coins
- + ???

The Mara and their Quest to Destroy That Which Humanity Clings to most Closely

- + TBD stay tuned

The Eventual Absorption of all Spiritual Life into the Blissful Void of the Fountain

- + Ongoing, this is a “heat death of the universe” situation

ADVENTURE FRONTS

The Darkness Within

- + Berg is granted some special gift by the slumbering spirit of a Dark Elf
- + ???
- + Berg becomes a horrific soul-rent psionic vampire creature, forever cut off from the eternal cycle of reincarnation

The Dissolving Soul of Ramus Krill

- + Ramus is brought back from the dead

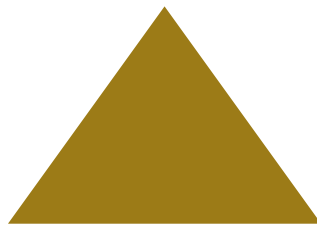
- + Ramus embraces the dark gifts of the Tower
- + ???
- + Ramus pays the price for his hubris

The Great Halfling People's Revolutionary Action

- + Halfling brass harvesters are mistreated by their human overlords
- + The miners and their community rally around Primrose Yurienva
- + The Primrose Manifesto is printed
- + The Night of Uprising unifies the monsters in Kazalo Station Ghetto to overthrow and oust all humans from their neighborhood
- + ???
- + The Sovereign Nation-State of Kazalo Station is declared, a peaceful land where workers control the means of production and all are comrades no matter their species (except humans you're not invited)



INSPIRATIONS FOR SEASON 3



Before I start any campaign (or in this case, begin a new arc of a campaign in a new location) I like to gather my inspirations. Whether they're tv shows, movies, comics, other games or whatever media happens to tickle my proverbial fancy, I'm the kind of game master who finds the whole world around him to be intensely inspiring. Sometimes the things I'll read are real-world (the best RPG supplement ever created is still Wikipedia) and sometimes they're fictional worlds or more ephemeral objets d'arts.

Going into season 3 of Court of Swords, we decided to visit the

Court of Wands. When I envision the Court of Wands, I imagine that it is to the Arabian Peninsula and beyond what the Court of Swords is to Southeastern Asia. Bigger, I imagine this land to stretch from sandy desert in the north, shining azure inland seas in the midlands and badlands and rocky wastes in the south, all cradling the most enormous fantasy city you can imagine smack dab in the middle - the City of Brass. The first place I looked was to actual real life history and geography. Here are a few things I found inspiring in my research.

Tangier

The city of Tangier has always fascinated me, as a place seemingly constantly straddling a dozen worlds. It seems to me to be a place ripe with tension and its history as an “interzone” is full of hooks. I think that a place much like this must exist on the border between the Court of Wands and her neighbors, a kind of shadowy town where one might brush shoulders with an angel in a neighborhood of devils.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tangier>



Istanbul

Another city with a long and storied history, whose deep mythologies are a mine of great resources to draw on. The Court of Wands is a desert defined by her oasis, and the more I learn about great cities the more I can make mine feel real.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Istanbul>



Islamic mythology

All of islamic mythology - which is to say, the stories of magic and enchantment that run throughout that culture's history - is a treasure trove of bits and pieces that have provided inspiration. As well, the pre-islamic religious practices in the Arabian regions of our world have given me lots to draw on.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_mythology

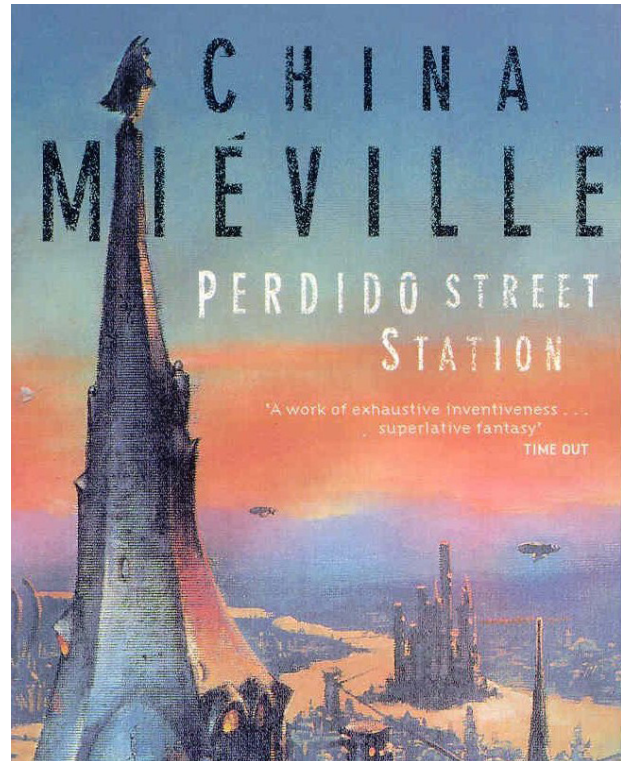
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_pre-Islamic_Arabia



Perdido Street Station

Outside of the real world, delving into fiction, I think my favourite story-of-a-city has to be the work of China Mieville, particularly his first novel Perdido Street Station. A weird book full of strange creatures and odd magic, Perdido Street Station is absolutely an influence on how I see my City of Brass. Less golden minarets, more rotting magitechnologically influenced slums.

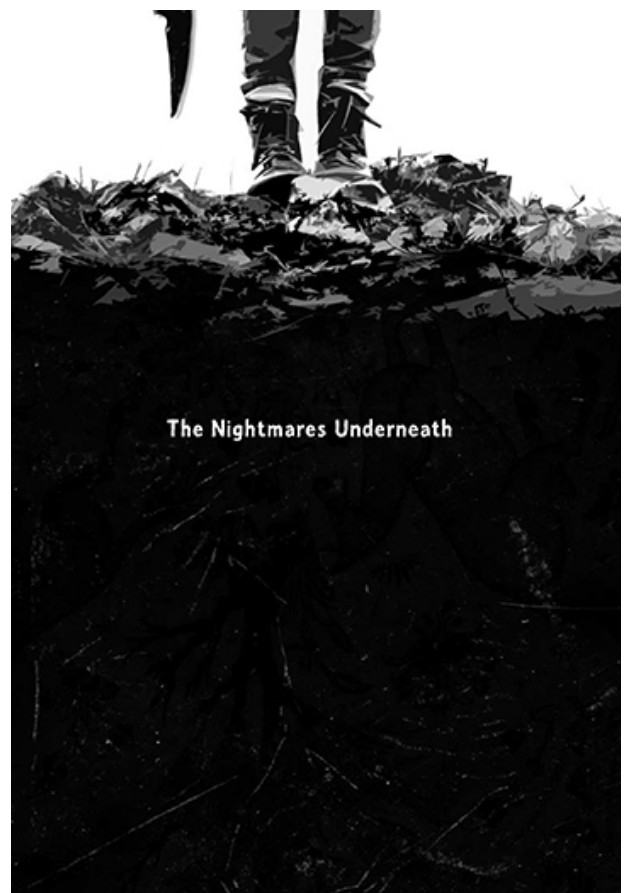
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perdido_Street_Station



The Nightmares Underneath

As far as games go, there are a few RPGs, one of which I've mentioned before as being a big inspiration mechanically, that are going to be dissected for flavour or mechanisms we'll see in Court of Swords. The Nightmares Underneath is proving particularly useful for giving me things to tempt the players to spend their money on - giving us systems for investing in shops, research, vice dens and other sorts of strange commerce one could get into in the City of Brass.

<https://redboxvancouver.wordpress.com/2016/11/14/the-nightmares-underneath-rpg/>



Blades in the Dark

As well, our own John Harper has provided some curious inspiration via the city of U'duasha, Crown of the Black Desert of Iruvia in the special edition of Blades in the Dark.

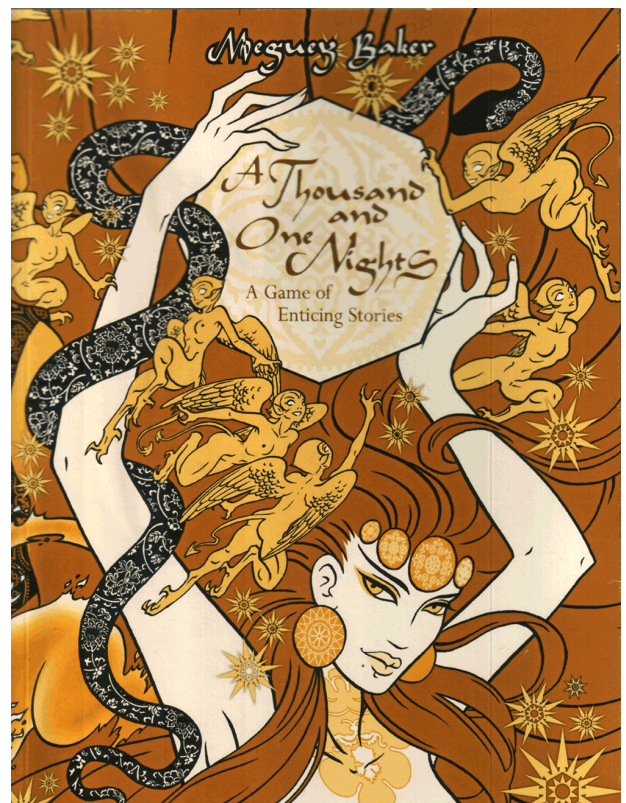
<http://www.evilhat.com/home/blades-in-the-dark/>



1001 Nights

Finally, the storytelling game 1001 Nights by Meg Baker of Night Sky Games is a real gem, and an interesting new look at the way the 1001 Nights story (itself a story about stories) can influence the way we tell our stories in RPGs. Pretty meta, super interesting stuff, and something that got me thinking “if two old men were telling tall tales about Berg and his friends over hookah and backgammon, what might they say?”

<http://nightskygames.com/welcome/game/1001Nights>



What's your favourite fantasy city? Got a tale of sword and sorcery set in a place that feels like the Court of Wands?
Send it my way. I love new inspiration.

THE SUNKEN ZIGGURAT OF ARRAK VAL'KHMMAW

Recently I was going through some photos I have stored on my iPad and I found these sketches I made on the plane trip from San Antonio back to Vancouver after JP and I had initially started planning and discussing Court of Swords. Eventually, these would make up the setting for the first arc - the village plagued by the dead and the as-yet unused ziggurat where Arrak val'Khmau, the Necromancer King lived. Originally I figured this

would just be a typical scary dude in a dungeon temple waiting to get rolled by the PCs, but I'm starting to wonder if what we saw was a seed planted to harvest for some "big bad of the whole game" situation. The Court of Swords, as you can see in the Fronts of the game is in some very bad shape... Maybe we'll return to these maps again. I thought you might like to see the rough sketches that sometimes accompany my GM prep.

↑
to the
marshes

houses

to the
road

market
square

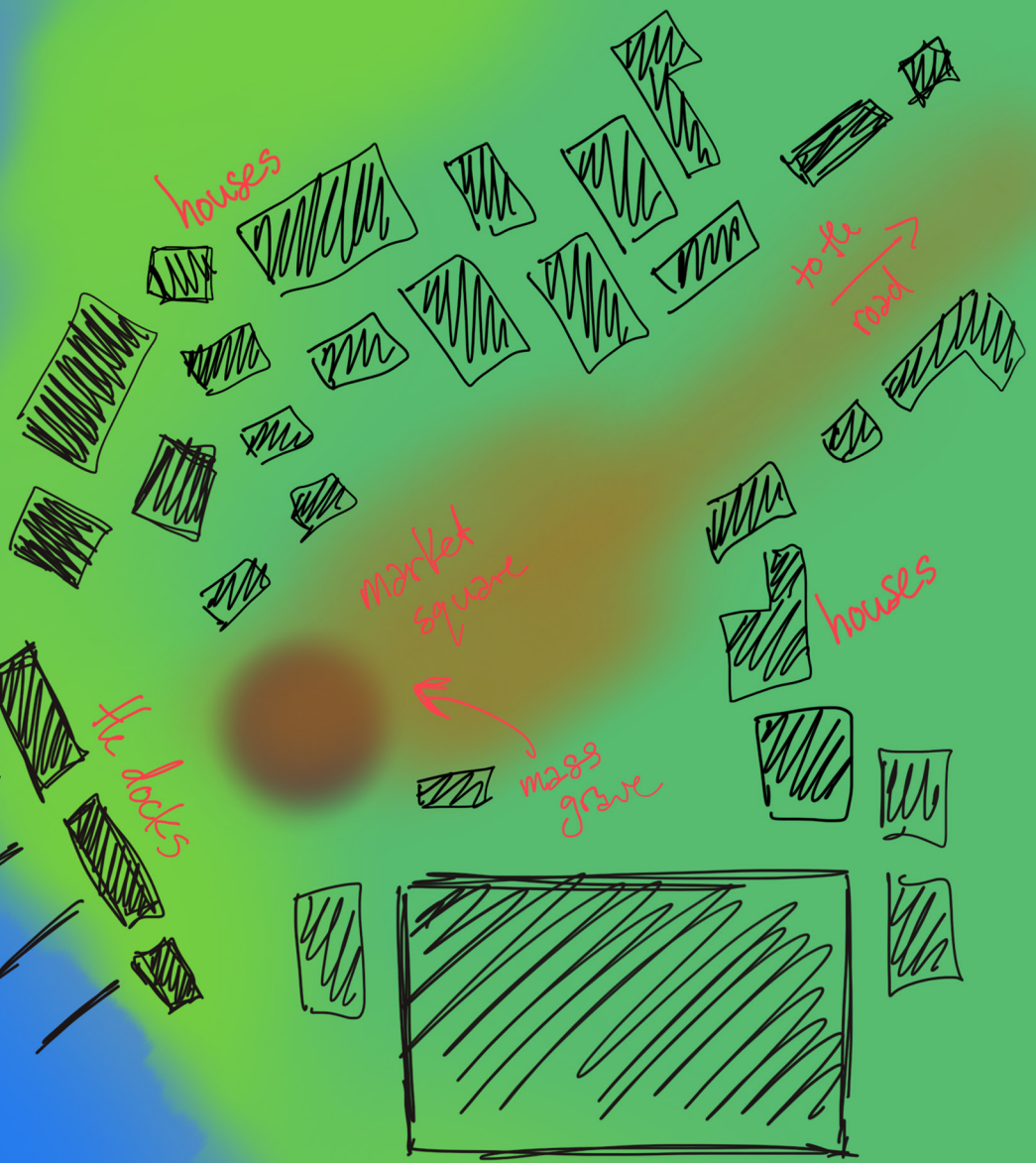
houses

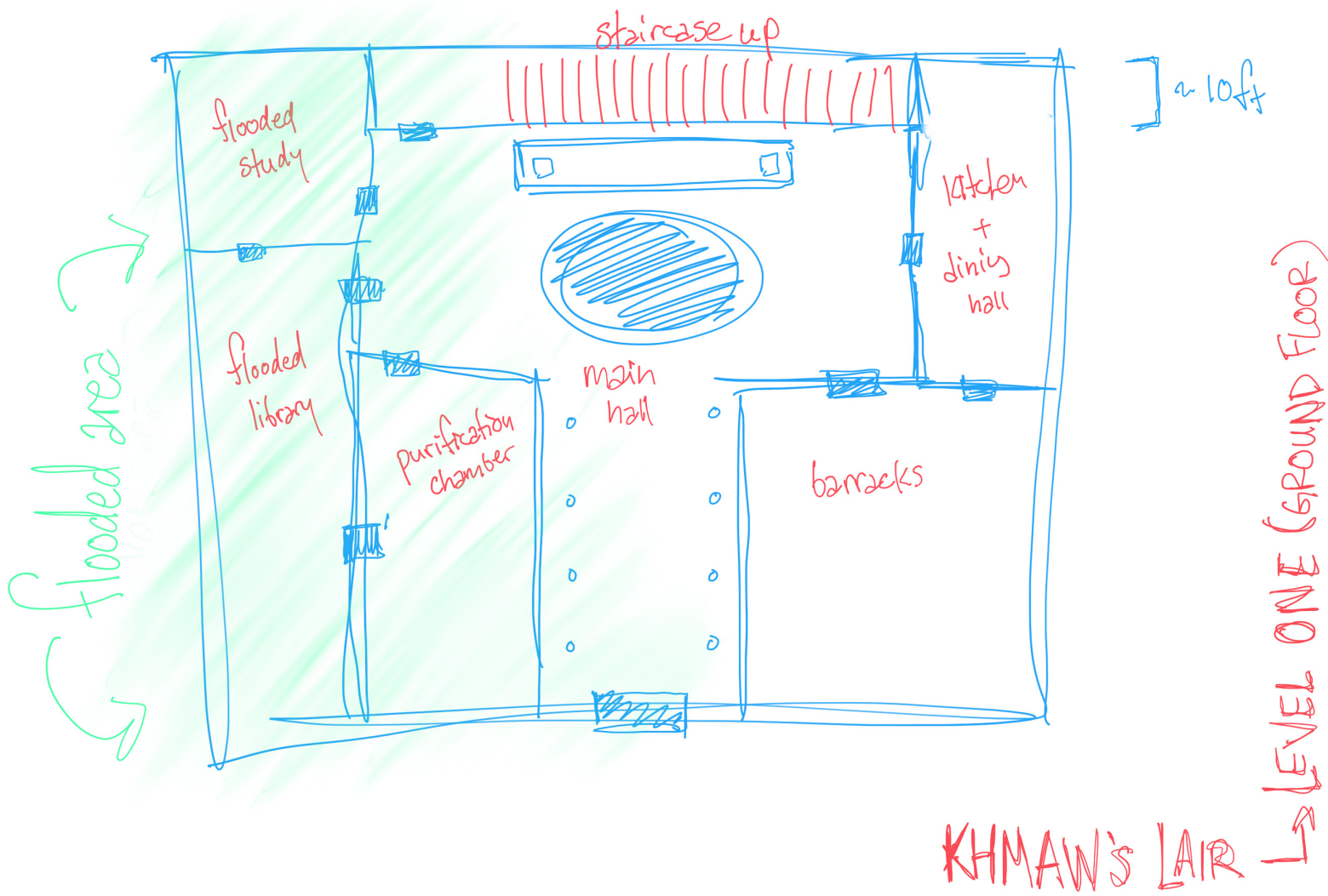
the docks

mass
grave

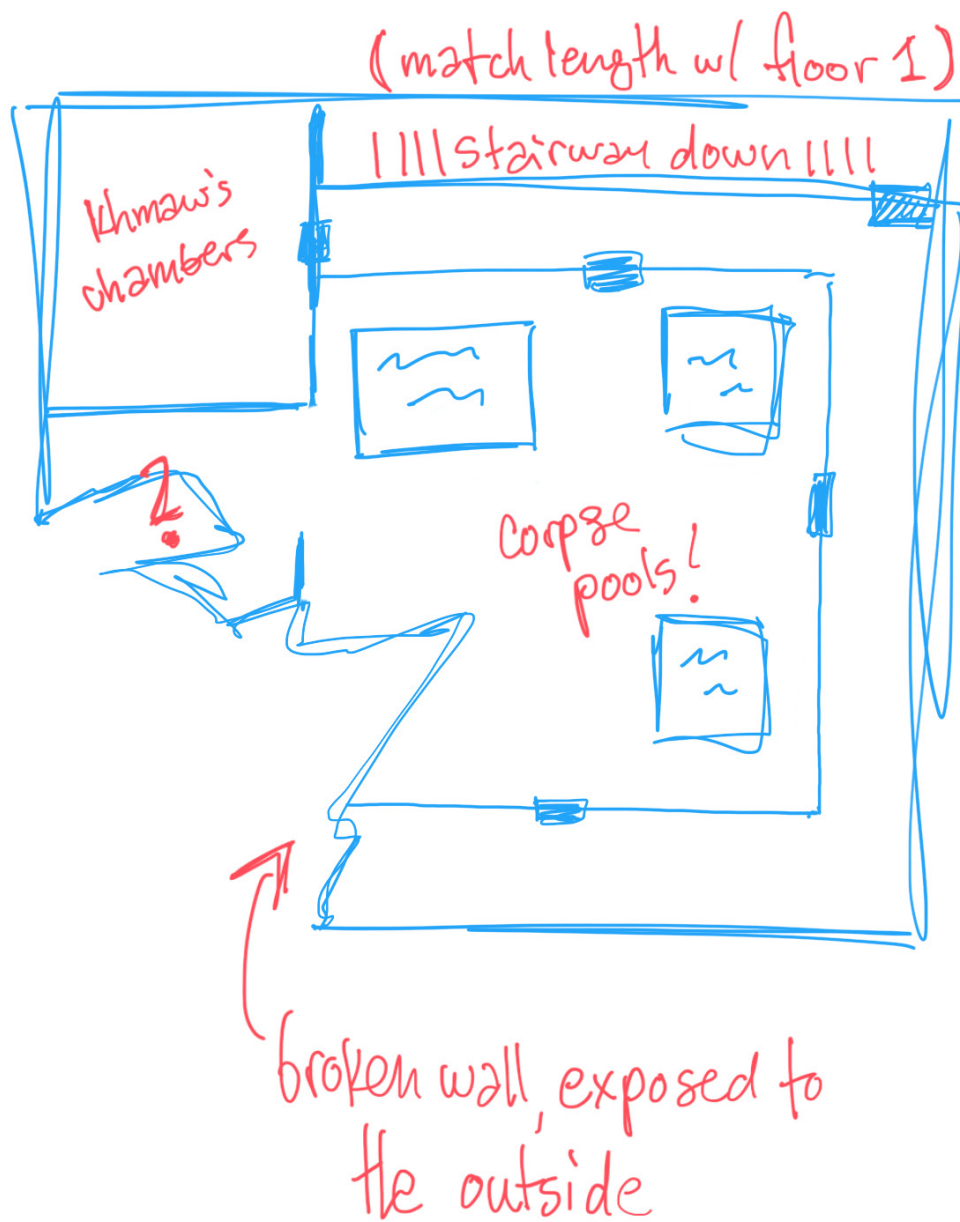
↓
downriver

Village Temple





] ~ 10 ft

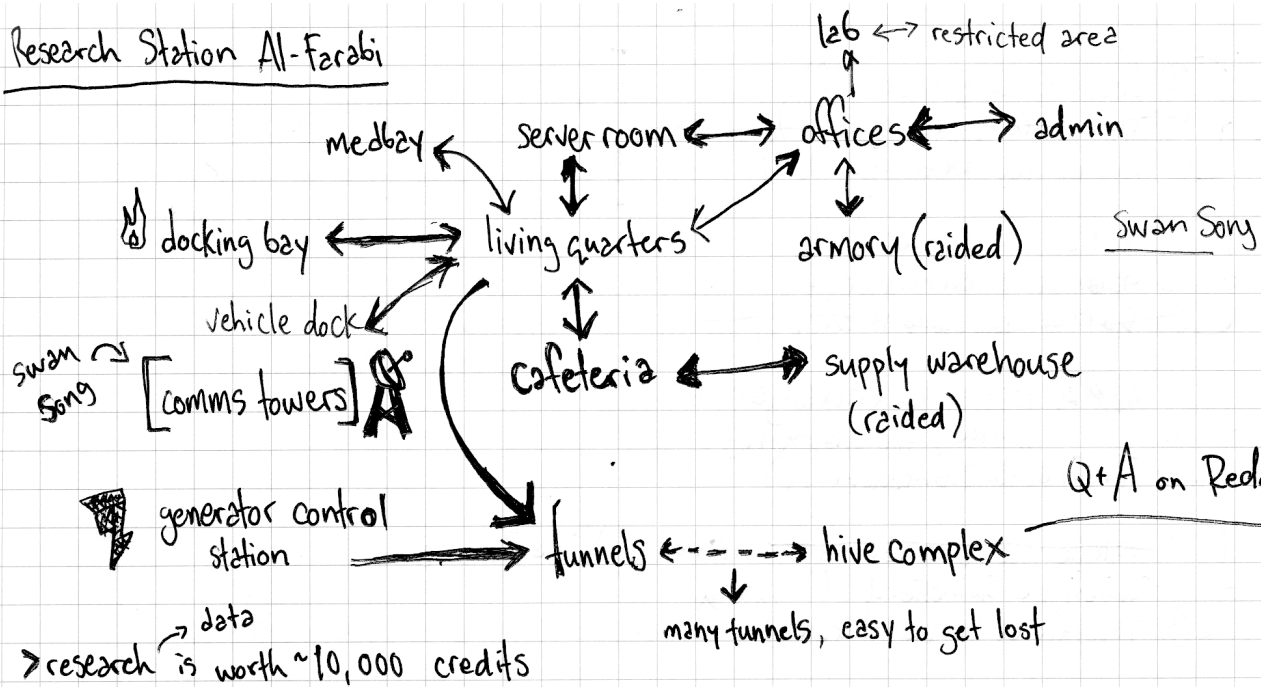


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SWAN SONG

“Caliente”
– Mr. Sicarian

Research Station Al-Farabi



Administrator ~~Karzan~~, 2 disk with info.
Al-Zawzhi

Mr. S
Vik/Higs
Bug/Piani

[Pi: preface all the statements]
with [truth] or [lie] or [unknown]

AC 3 hp 26 21 ✖
~~10~~ d10
+4 to hit

} big bugs
"cryptocercus
electrophage"

Pi is learning about metaphor
and untruth, literality, etc.

Swan Song GM Notes

Commentary

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Research Station al-Farabi

Continuing the PCs adventures on the insect planet, I knew that I needed to have a map of the facility if I was going to create a kind of tense Aliens-style room-to-room bug hunt. I'm terrible at drawing maps, generally, and modern or sci-fi maps especially. I've always been interested in architecture but less as a student of the form and more a distant admirer. Buildings are good for photographing, not for mapping out. At least in my head. So instead, I created something that fills a similar purpose. I do this a lot - make flowcharts instead of proper maps. Knowing what connects to what and, when appropriate, can take someone like me who has no drawing skill whatsoever and give them the ability to understand at least the connections between things. In this way, you can map out relationships, storylines, even whole worlds. I suppose it's not all words and lines - check out that awesome communications tower. Maybe I have a career in design waiting for me, after all. What do you think, Daniel? *[Daniel's note: Yes]*

As a note of trivia, the station is named after Abū Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad Al Fārābī who was a philosopher and scientist from the 800s. Amusingly, his name in the west was Alfarabius, which sounds a whole lot like a certain cyborg with a speech impediment we'd come to know and love down the line.

Learn more about my homeboy Al-Farabi right here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Farabi>

[TRUTH]

Pi went through a bit of an Elcor phase, learning what metaphor, truth and lies were. It didn't last long, because while it was a fun temporary gimmick, it's sort of dull after a while to play out strange vocal or linguistic quirks over and over in a campaign. Plus, Pi is a fast learner.

A Group of Twelve Smugglers

This is the Whale Shaman of Swan Song.

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